Preface

The Origins and Importance of Political Disinformation

Democracies around the world face rising levels of disinformation. The intentional spread of falsehoods and related attacks on the rights of minorities, press freedoms, and the rule of law all challenge the basic norms and values on which institutional legitimacy and political stability depend. The many varieties of disinformation include: politicians lying about their policies and political activities; attacks on the scientific evidence surrounding important issues such as climate change; the spread of "deep state," "globalist" and various bizzare conspiracy theories; and the invention of stories to inflame existing social and political conflicts.

The sources of these claims include elected politicians, movement leaders, social media influencers, foreign governments, and political information sites that often use familiar journalistic formats to package propaganda. Many of these efforts come from the radical-right movements, parties and wealthy libertarian interests that oppose broad and inclusive democratic representation, and the public interest protections of government. *The Disinformation Age* traces the origins, mechanisms, effects, and possible remedies for the spread of these forms of disruptive communication. While this volume focuses on the United States, similar patterns can be found in many other democratic nations.

Consider just one example of how disinformation can disrupt democratic political institutions. Following an historic reign of error and the promotion of thousands of "alternative facts," Donald Trump ventured into new and uncharted territory by inviting various leaders of foreign

nations to investigate the activities of his domestic political rival, Joe Biden. Most of his concerns were specifically framed in terms of the disinformation circulating in right-wing circles, which challenged official government investigations concluding that Russian operatives had hacked Democratic National Committee email servers; leaked information damaging to presidential candidate Hillary Clinton; and spread "fake news" stories via Facebook and other social media during the 2016 election. Trump's alternative account of these events was typical of the fluid nature of information unhinged from evidence, reason, and credible sources.

Although years of lies and false claims had become routine in the course of Trump's "Twitter presidency," he seemed to cross a constitutional line by pressuring a foreign leader to intervene in US domestic politics. A whistleblower reported a phone call between Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky during which Trump urged the Ukrainian leader to dig up dirt on Joe Biden and his son Hunter, in exchange for the US military aid needed to fight a Russian-backed insurgency in the country. The whistleblower complaint to the Inspector General of the Intelligence Community described how Trump used the power of his office to "solicit interference from a foreign country in the 2020 election."[1] Among the favors Trump asked of the Ukrainian president was a demand for him to look into the whereabouts of a "missing" computer server used in the Democratic National Committee (DNC) hack. Trump's request followed the logic of a conspiracy theory originating, in part, with Russian sources, which claimed that actors in Ukraine had organized the hack.

This wasn't the first time Trump raised the matter of a "missing" DNC server or implied a Ukrainian link, specifically that the cyber-security firm, CrowdStrike, that investigated the hack was connected to Ukraine. On another occasion, Trump said, "That's what I heard. I heard it's owned by a very rich Ukrainian, that's what I heard."[2] In a 2017 interview with the Associated Press, Trump referred to CrowdStrike as a "Ukraine-based" company. None of these claims were true. CrowdStrike is in fact headquartered in Sunnyvale, California, with an office in Arlington, Virginia. It was founded in 2011 by an accountant from New Jersey named George Kurtz and a Russian-born American citizen named Dmitri Alperovitch. What about the missing server that, according to the right-wing conspiracy theorists, was spirited away to Ukraine by CrowdStrike? In actuality, no servers located locally to the DNC were involved in the breach. Even though the facts of the case led to Trump's impeachment by Democrats in the US House of Representatives and an eventual trial in the Senate, Trump and his supporters continued to rely on the conspiracy theory.

Reporting by Ashley Parker and Philip Rucker in the *Washington Post* covered a presidential Twitterstorm that went on for weeks after the start of the impeachment inquiry (one burst included thirty-three tweets in twenty minutes). Trump told his sixty-five million followers that the proceedings amounted to a coup. He charged the head of the congressional impeachment inquiry with treason. And he retweeted a warning from a prominent religious leader that his impeachment would "cause a civil war-like fracture in this nation." Stephen Miller, a Trump senior policy adviser, told Fox News's Chris Wallace that the whistleblower was "a deep state operative, pure and simple." Rather than a half-baked conspiracy, Trump's supporters saw a lying press colluding with the "deep state" to produce fake news in support of endless witch-hunts against a beleaguered president fighting to save America.

The story that developed interactively between Trump and his supporters did not spring from thin air. It was spread in timely fashion by a distributed propaganda network backed by wealthy political interests and amplified by various political organizations and related media platforms. According to Jane Mayer writing in the *New Yorker*, the Ukraine conspiracy got its start with a Florida-based organization called the Government Accountability Institute (GAI), which bills itself as "America's Premier Investigative Unit Exposing Cronyism and Corruption." GAI was founded in 2012 by Stephen Bannon, the same erstwhile Trump ally who once headed Breitbart News and cofounded the ill-fated Cambridge Analytica, which compromised the accounts of more than fifty million Facebook users in spreading stealthy propaganda for Trump in the 2016 elections, and in support of the "Leave" campaign in the UK Brexit referendum earlier that year. GAI had been given millions of tax-exempt dollars by Robert Mercer's family foundation. The Mercers also supported Breitbart, and Robert Mercer cofounded Cambridge Analytica with Steve Bannon. Rebekah Mercer, Robert's daughter, is the GAI's board chair. The Mercers also donated generously to the Trump campaign. GAI president Peter Schweizer, also an editor-at-large at Breitbart News, was well-known for his conspiracy writing about Hillary Clinton. His later book about Biden and his son laid out the basic outlines of Trump's Ukraine conspiracy theory, and earned Schweizer an appearance on *Hannity* and other Fox News programs to publicize the conspiracy.

Mission accomplished: the damaging evidence-based account that Trump was trading foreign aid for political favors was thus neatly

repaired by the alternative story that he was, in fact, making sure that countries with which the USA does business were not corrupt. According to the disinformation account, Trump and his team were investigating the real corruption of the past government and Joe Biden. The core audience for this alternative version were Trump supporters who follow him on Twitter, Fox News, Rush Limbaugh's radio talk show, and many other media outlets involved in amplifying the story.

How is such strategic disinformation produced and spread, and with what effects? These are core questions around which a new field of communication research is emerging: the study of disinformation and networked propaganda. This field has room for both qualitative research (e.g., who funds the disinformation sites, political organizations and think tanks?) and quantitative work (e.g., how do large volumes of dubious content flow through various information and communication networks?). This emerging area of study, as illustrated by the range of work in this book, also looks at challenges to the traditional press and the practice of journalism, as well as the erosion of democratic legitimacy and liberal values. These threats raise important questions about how to protect democratic institutions and values, and how to regulate disruptive information and the political organizations and media companies implicated in its spread.

how did we get here?

There are many explanations for how we arrived at our current "post-truth" era. Some point to social media's propensity to algorithmically push extremist content and to draw likeminded persons together with accounts unburdened by facts. Others emphasize the role of the Russians, Iranians, North Koreans, or Chinese in efforts to disrupt elections and exaggerate domestic divisions. Other standard accounts point to voter ignorance, racial resentments or religious intolerance. Adherents to these explanations advocate better media literacy and citizenship education, and more fact-checking in journalistic accounts. While there is merit to these and other accounts, they fail to address the full scope of the problem.

In varying ways, several of the contributors to this volume focus on the erosion of liberal democratic institutions, particularly parties, elections, the press, and science. These institutions produce information anchored in norm-based processes for introducing facts into public discourse, including peer-review in science, rules of evidence in courts, professional practices and norms of fairness and facticity in journalism. At the end of

the day, Trump's unhinged conspiracies reflected not just his personal psychological condition, but also a broader institutional crisis that brings with it an epistemological crisis. In the absence of authoritative institutions, Trump and his enablers were unanchored by facts. Instead, they had "alternative facts."

WHY THE INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS?

Some erosion of trust in institutions stems from historic incidents of government deceit, such as years of lying about the Vietnam War, followed four decades later by the lies supporting the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003. As the messenger for government communications, journalism also suffered because of its uncritical coverage of the pretext of the war. The business press also could have added more critical reporting to its boosterish coverage of Wall Street prior to the financial collapse of 2008. Meanwhile, business has also contributed to the spread of disinformation by promoting harmful products that have put public safety and health at risk, with particularly egregious examples including the denial of scientific evidence about the risks of cigarette smoking, pesticides, and other chemicals, as well as climate change.

While this legacy of deceptive communication may have weakened public trust in traditional, authoritative information sources (e.g., government and science), the recent era has witnessed more systematic efforts by political organizations and media companies to ramp up public anger and mistrust. Further complicating these problems is the proliferation of communication technologies that enable citizens to produce and spread content, as well as to consume it, from a greater range of questionable sources than ever before. This book explores the rise of the current disinformation order and the role of democratic institutions, political organizations, and information and communication technologies in that story. While this is largely a story about the United States, the political and communication processes involved also apply in different ways to other democracies. We hope that our frameworks will be of use to scholars in other countries.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The authors gathered here are distinguished representatives of the interdisciplinary perspectives of history, political science, sociology, law, and communication – fields that are all helpful to understanding the origins and importance of the problem. While some observers approach

disinformation as something that has emerged seemingly from nowhere, the chapters in this book trace various origins, such as: the history of business deception in promoting corporate interests over the public interest, government lying to promote dubious policies, and the rise of political influence networks that limit the capacities of government to represent the public interest. These historical factors have contributed both to the erosion of trust in public institutions, and to a related decline in confidence in the news media that have traditionally connected public authorities and citizens. As authoritative information is increasingly challenged, new digital platforms and social media networks supply the demand for alternative political truths that are actively consumed by disaffected citizens. The growing volume of disinformation fuels political movements and parties largely on the radical right, resulting in attacks on the press, the fostering of hate, efforts to exclude various minority groups, and the rise of ethnic nationalism in many nations. The book traces the origins of this decline of institutional authority, the state of current disinformation systems, the historical origins of systemic disinformation, the importance of independent public media, and possible regulatory and political remedies for these problems.

In Chapter 1, Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston define the nature of disinformation, and outline the challenges to healthy democratic discourse. Disinformation is often explained in terms of individual-level psychological processes, including the tendency to seek information that is supportive of existing beliefs or to be more skeptical of information that runs contrary to existing beliefs. These might be thought of as demand-side explanations. With its endless supply of unfiltered and often unhinged claims, social media is said to exacerbate these mental proclivities. With the problem understood in this way, obvious solutions involve media-literacy programs, fact-checking, and some form of content regulation.

While not dismissing the significance of cognitive processes, Bennett and Livingston step back to consider the broader political and economic attacks on public institutions that have traditionally produced authoritative information in democracies. This account focuses on the rise of political influence networks anchored in think tanks, lobbying campaigns, tax-supported "charitable" political organizations, and electoral campaign finance laws. These efforts to undermine the representative capacity of parties, governments and state institutions have also undermined the credibility of many elected officials, along with the legacy press which carries their messages. The result has been a political backlash against previously authoritative institutions by those on both left and right. The

right especially has organized around ethnic nationalism, anti-immigration, and other divisive political issues. These political ruptures are magnified and supported by the large disinformation networks that have grown with the help of wealthy business interests and the elected officials that they support. Understood through a political and economic lens, solutions are found in reforms designed to strengthen authoritative institutions.

The following section of the book covers the current political communication situation, beginning with Chapter 2 by Yochai Benkler that describes the results of a large-scale study of the political media ecosystem during the 2016 US presidential campaign and the first year of the Trump presidency. The major finding is that the American political media ecosystem is asymmetrically polarized, with an insular, well-defined right wing, and the rest of the media, from the center-right to the far left, forming a single media ecosystem anchored by traditional media organizations like the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. The analysis shows that the American radical right is more active in producing and sharing disinformation than the left. The chapter then offers an analysis of why political economy, rather than technology, was the source of this asymmetry. Benkler outlines the interactions between political culture, law and regulation, and communications technology, which underwrote the emergence of the propaganda feedback loop in the right wing of the American media ecosystem.

Chapter 3 by Paul Starr describes how we became so vulnerable to disinformation in this digital era. He argues that, like recent analyses of democratization, which have turned to the reverse processes of democratic backsliding and breakdown, analyses of contemporary communication need to attend to the related processes of backsliding and breakdown in the media – or what he refers to as "media degradation." After defining that term in relation to democratic theory, Starr focuses on three developments that have contributed to increased vulnerability to disinformation: 1) the attrition of journalistic capacities; 2) the degradation of standards in both the viral and broadcast streams of the new media ecology; and 3) the rising power of digital platforms with incentives to prioritize growth and profits and no legal accountability for user-generated content. Policies of limited government and reduced regulation of business, along with partisan politics, have contributed to these developments.

The next section of the book examines key historical roots of the problem. Chapter 4 by Naomi Oreskes, Erik Conway, and Charlie

Tyson asks a deceptively simple question: how did so many Americans come to believe that economic and political freedoms are indivisible from one another? One part of the answer involves organized campaigns by trade associations to sell these principles to the American people. This chapter examines one such campaign: the National Association of Manufacturers' propaganda effort of 1935–1940. A central part of this campaign was the radio show *The American Family Robinson*. This folksy drama of small-town American life didactically warned of "foreign" socialist theories and reassured listeners of the beneficence of business leaders. The program offers a case study in corporate propaganda. In its bid to convince listeners that the American way of life depends on the free market – and that any move toward social democracy presents a threat – the show dramatizes argumentative and rhetorical procedures that continue to shape American political culture.

Chapter 5 by Nancy MacLean examines an important source of the strategic disinformation now rife in American public life: the Koch network of extreme right donors, allied organizations, and academic grantees. She argues that these architects of the radical transformation of our institutions and legal system have adopted the tactic of disinformation in the knowledge that the hard-core libertarian agenda was extremely unpopular, and therefore required stealth to succeed. The chapter tells the story of how Charles Koch and his inner circle, having determined in the 1970s that changes significant enough to enable a "constitutional revolution" (in the words of the political economist James McGill Buchanan) would be needed to protect capitalism from democracy, then went about experimenting to make this a reality. In the 1980s, they first incubated ideas for misleading the public to move their agenda forward, as shown by the strategy for Social Security privatization that Buchanan recommended to Koch's Cato Institute, and by the operations of Citizens for a Sound Economy, the network's first astroturf – or fake grassroots – organizing effort. Subsequent practices of active disinformation by this network, for a project that could not succeed by persuasion and organizing alone, become more comprehensible when understood as driven by a mix of messianic dogma and self-interest. Later cases include tobacco "scholarship" for hire by Buchanan's colleagues at George Mason University to deter the public health campaign against smoking; climate science denial to stop action on global warming; promotion of the myth of mass voter fraud to leverage racism to restrict the electorate; assurances of the benefits of an Article V Constitutional Convention, restricted to a few pre-announced changes; and the use of concocted memes of violent mobs

requiring restraint, in order to win passage of new legislation to criminalize protest, particularly against the fossil fuel industry.

The next section bridges the historical roots of the problem with the challenges of making contemporary policy to regulate these abuses of transparent communication. Chapter 6 by Dave Karpf explores how online conspiracy theories, disinformation, and propaganda have changed over the twenty-five-year history of the World Wide Web. Drawing a historical comparison between digital disinformation in the 1996 presidential election and the 2016 presidential election, the chapter explores how the mechanisms of online diffusion, the political economy of journalism and propaganda, and the slow, steady erosion of load-bearing norms among political elites have combined to create a much more dangerous context today than in decades past. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how technology platforms, political elites, and journalistic organizations might respond to the current state of online disinformation.

Chapter 7 by Heidi Tworek explores five historical patterns in information manipulation and suggests how these patterns can guide contemporary policy-making about the Internet. The historical resonances remind us to pay attention to physical infrastructure, understand disinformation as an international relations problem, examine business structures more than individual content, consider long-term consequences of regulation, and tackle broader economic and social issues beyond media. The framework of five patterns emerged from Tworek's testimony before the International Grand Committee on Big Data, Privacy, and Democracy in 2019.

Ben Epstein (Chapter 8) concludes the policy section by explaining that although the dangers of disinformation campaigns are real and growing quickly, effective interventions have remained elusive. Why is it so difficult to regulate online disinformation? This exploration builds on the chapter by Heidi Tworek and analyzes three major challenges to effective regulation: 1) defining the problem clearly so that regulators can address it, 2) deciding who should be in charge of creating and enforcing regulations, and 3) understanding what effective regulation might actually look like. After analyzing these challenges, Epstein suggests four standards for effective regulation of disinformation. First, regulation should target the negative effects, while consciously minimizing any additional harm caused by the regulation itself. Second, regulation should be proportional to the harm caused. Third, effective regulation must be able to adapt to changes in technology and disinformation strategies. And fourth, regulators should be as independent as possible from political and corporate influence.

The following section examines the possible role of, and challenges to, public broadcasting in restoring trusted public information. In Chapter 9, Patricia Aufderheide asks: Can US public broadcasting provide a unique bulwark against disinformation? At a time when commercial journalism's business model has eroded and disinformation abounds, there are ample reasons to turn to the public broadcasting service model. The service was founded with Progressive-era rhetoric about an informed public, and has withstood relentless attacks from neoconservatives, although not without casualties. Public broadcasting has two of the most trusted media brands in the USA, National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Broadcasting System (PBS). Aufderheide shows how the structure of public broadcasting both limits its ability to serve as a counter to disinformation, and also in some ways protects it against attacks.

In Chapter 10, Victor Pickard makes the case for why a new public media system is necessary to confront the "systemic market failure" plaguing American journalism. While underscoring normative foundations, this chapter tries to address the "how did we get here?" and "what is to be done?" questions. After contextualizing problems with disinformation and the contemporary journalism crisis, the chapter explores various criteria for what this new public media should entail, and concludes with a discussion about the necessary policies for actualizing structural alternatives to the overly commercialized American media system. This analysis addresses similar recent developments with other public systems around the world, including the BBC.

The concluding chapter by Steven Livingston and Lance Bennett (Chapter 11) reviews the historical attacks on authoritative public institutions, and raises the question of why many of the political organizations responsible for eroding trusted information sources should continue to be granted tax-protected status as charitable organizations. This seemingly bizarre reality shows how far public institutions in the United States have become bent to the service of private interests that aid the spread of disinformation. This conclusion invites readers to think about why there is so little attention devoted to the protection of democracy and the quality of citizen information upon which it depends.

NOTES

1. Michael D. Shear and Nicholas Fandos, "Impeachment Report Says Trump Solicited Foreign Election Interference," *New York Times*, December 13,

2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/12/03/us/politics/impeachment-trump-intelligence-committee.html.

2. Dan Primack, "Trump gets facts wrong on DNC cybersecurity company," *Axios*, April 24, 2017, www.axios.com/trump-gets-facts-wrong-on-dnc-cybersecurity-company-1513301806-82976411-9d64-4898-ae9b-0a68b9a350bb.html.